Economic & Political WEEKLY

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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 42 (Oct. 16, 1993), pp. 2282-2287
Published by: Economic and Political Weekly
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400290
Accessed: 31/10/2014 11:03

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'Denationalising' the Past

'Nation' in E V Ramasamy's Political Discourse

M S S Pandian

Departing from the conception which claims the 'nationalisation' of the past as a universal given of nations, this article argues that it has been possible at least in certain cases to imagine nations as disengaged from the past. To illustrate such a possibility the concept of 'nation' as propagated by E V Ramasamy, who denied its origin in classical Indian/Tamil past and envisaged it fully in the future, is analysed.

> Thus the days of magicians and fetishes will end; you will have to fight...
>
> —Jean-Paul Sartre
> in preface to Fanon (1985:26).

BY now it is part of the academic common sense that nations, in their search for legitimacy, reinterpret and usurp remote past(s) as their own. As Benedict Anderson (1983: 19, 47) puts it in his book on nationalism, "If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical', the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past...," and "that image of antiquity" is "central to the subjective idea of the nation."

Departing from such a conception which claims the 'nationalisation' of the past as a universal given of nations, the present paper argues that it has been possible at least in certain cases to imagine nations as disengaged from the past. Towards illustrating such an alternate possibility, the paper analyses the concept of the 'nation' as propagated by E V Ramasamy, a man who perennially carried the appellation of an 'anti-national'. Freed from the mainstream nationalist binary of nationalism vs colonialism, anchored in history and rationalism as progress, troubled all the time about citizenship, E V Ramasamy's concept of the nation denied its origin in the classical Indian/Tamil past and envisaged it fully in the anticipatory. Further, it constantly violated the certitude about boundaries, identities, agents of change and went beyond the territoriality of the nation.

In tracing the contours of E V Ramasamy's 'nation', my attempt is not only to explore the relationship between the nation and the past, but also to recover one of the marginalised discourses on the nation, which has been fossilised in the Indian nationalist historiography as belonging to the 'other' of the national, i e, 'anti-national'. Such attempts at recovering alternate concepts of the nation seem pertinent and urgent as the official 'nation' has become one of the most important source of legitimacy for the state in India as well as for a range of political formations varying from the Hindu communalists to the leftists.

I

Citizenship, Colonialism and Nation

E V Ramasamy's sojourn in the Indian National Congress was brief, a mere five years in an active political career spanning over half a century. Joining the organisation in 1920 during the non-cooperation movement, he not only spent considerable time, energy and money for such nationalist causes as 'khadder' and prohibition, but also engaged himself spiritedly in taking up a series of issues which had a direct bearing on the question of citizenship in the nation-in-the-making: he obdurately staged 'satyagrahas' in front of the Mahadevar temple in Vaikkom, which earned him two jail terms and the honorific 'Vaikkom Veerar' ('Hero of Vaikkom'), seeking rights for the lower castes to enter the temple streets; opposed bitterly the practice of having separate dining arrangements for brahmin and non-brahmin students in Shermadevi Gurukulam, a traditional school funded partly by the Tamil Nadu Congress committee and run by a former 'revolutionary terrorist' V V S Iyer with the objective to impart "high ideals of national education"; and repeatedly argued for 'communal representation' (or what has come to be called today as 'reservations') for the non-brahmins in public services and representative bodies such as the legislature—a demand which was marginalised and dismissed by the mainstream nationalists as "detrimental to national unity". E V Ramasamy's conception of free and equal citizenship as the key constitutive element of the nation did not evoke the kind of response he had hoped for from the Tamil Nadu Congress, the leadership of which was dominated by brahmin elite. After a series of experiments within the Congress, which may be termed as experiments on the question of citizenship in the nation, he finally broke ranks with the organisation in November 1925, when two of his resolutions favouring 'communal representation' were disallowed in the Kancheepuram conference of the Tamil Nadu Congress.[1] Thereafter he declared his political agenda to be: "no god; no religion; no Gandhi; no Congress; and no brahmins".[2]

E V Ramasamy's doubts about the place of the subordinate classes in the Congressite nation and his resolve to fight the Congress, Gandhi, and brahminical Hinduism were strengthened by Gandhi's utterances in Tamil Nadu during 1927. In the highly charged Tamil political environment, Gandhi not only said, "Varnashrama Dharma is not an unmitigated evil but it is one of the foundations on which Hinduism is built [and] defines man's mission on earth" [Irschick 1969: 337-38], but also described the brahmins as the "finest flower of Hinduism and humanity". He added: "I will do nothing to wither it. I know that it is well able to take care of itself. It has weathered many a storm before now. Only let it not be said of non-brahmans that they attempted to rob the flower of its fragrance and lustre..." [Sundararajan 1989: 457].[3]

Importantly, the identity that E V Ramasamy established between god, religion, Gandhi, the Congress and the brahmins was based on his understanding that all of them stood in the way of different subordinate social groups such as the sudras, the dalits and women, attaining free and equal citizenship in the nation-in-the-making. His political career then onwards was more or less an unwavering journey through the Self Respect Movement (founded in 1926) and the Dravidar Kazhagam (founded in 1944) in search of substantive, as opposed to formal, citizenship for the subordinate groups. The centrality that he assigned to citizenship as constitutive of the nation is more than evident from the way he assessed and combated the nationalist concept of 'swaraj' and the manner in which he responded to the British raj.

'Swaraj'

At one level, he viewed the nationalist demand for swaraj or self-rule as a conspiracy by the local elite (who, for him, were as varied as the brahmins as opposed to the sudras, the Marwaris as opposed to the Tamils, men as opposed to women... depending on differing relational contexts) to hegemonise the subordinate classes, and as a process which would eventually affirm rather than erase their unequal status. At another level, he viewed it as an impossible project given the innumerable criss-crossing of hierarchies and relations of authority and subordination. Writing in 1928 about

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the condition of untouchables and women, he noted:

> [We] have been telling that unless the above two oppressions [i e, of untouchables and women] are destroyed, asking for freedom to India, or claiming that Indians themselves will take care of India's administration and security, or telling that India does not need even a little association with outsiders... is utterly foolish or dishonesty involving selfish conspiracy...
>
> ...we are keeping sections of our people enslaved, oppressed and degraded—without thinking that they are of our society, our brothers; without any compassion; without giving them the freedom we so desire; without thinking that they are human beings. So handing over the welfare and freedom of these oppressed people to us is nothing other than handing over sheep to a butcher... [Periyar 1984: 71].

In 1948, his dream of a separate Dravida Nadu already in shambles, he queried, "Is the brahmin's rule swarajya for the Parayan [untouchable]? Is the cat's rule swarajya for the rat? [Is] landlord's rule [swarajya] for the peasant? Is owner's rule swarajya for the worker?..."[4] He argued that India was not a nation but a mere museum of castes, religions, languages and gods.[5]

In short, with citizenship being invested with singular primacy in E V Ramasamy's discourse on the nation, it was, for him, the moment of equality of the subordinate social groups with the rest of the nation alone which could signify the arrival of the nation. For instance, referring to the position of Indian women—an issue which engaged him all through his political career[6]—he interpreted their freedom and equality as real swaraj:

> The concept of husband-wife relationship has been one of master-slave relationship. The essential philosophy of marriage has been to insist on women's slavery... Until women are liberated from such marriages and from men, our nation cannot attain freedom.[7]

He treated this lack of equality for women in the indigenous society as the proof of Indians not having the "spirit of freedom" and they being "children of slaves" [Periyar 1984: 73]. Thus, 1947 did not signal the nation for him and he declared August 15 as a day of mourning.

British Raj

Let us now turn to his attitude towards the British raj. He, as a Congressman 'fanatically' committed to Gandhi, condemned the raj unequivocally: "The Britishers love to repeat that we Indians are brutes. Maybe you are and I am too. And it is up to us to demonstrate to them that we are brutish enough to drive them out to wrest our national freedom" [Visswanathan 1983: 38]. Following his disenchantment with the Congress, he re-evaluated his stance on the raj and found several things of the raj worthy of support. He argued, "The 'Hindu India' which believed that people should abide by the authority of the king and the king is the god was taught only by the 'English India', that the king should abide by the people and the king is the servant of the people."[8] According to him, "Though we have lost much from being the slaves of the British, we have profited at least a little and understood ourselves as human beings. If we had remained the slaves of north Indians, we would have remained 'sudran', 'rakshashan', 'chandalan', 'asuran', 'kundakan', 'kolakan', 'pratilokan', 'narakan'..."[9] He, time and again, claimed that substituting the British rule with swaraj would be equivalent to the "suicide of the common people"—unless one could be confident of a new rule based not on Manu Dharma, Varnashrama Dharma and brahmin hegemony, i e, institutions which, according to him, legitimised inequality across castes, gender and forms of labour, and thus invalidated the possibility of overarching equality.[10]

However, E V Ramasamy's approval of the raj was not unqualified and was often only a grudging approval. He was disappointed that the British, unlike in their own nation, did not attempt sufficiently to establish a full-fledged rule of Manitha [Human] Dharma in India, but also followed Manu Dharma in large measure. He offered two sets of reasons for such differential politics practised by the British—one in their own nation and the other in the colony.

Indigenous Elite

According to him, the first set of reasons which disabled the British raj from going all the way in affirming Manitha Dharma in the colony could be located in the resistance to such dharma by the Indian national elites themselves. He repeatedly cited instances of sustained Indian opposition to such initiatives as the Devadasi Abolition Act, the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Hindu Religious Endowment Act, which were represented as the excesses of the British rule. We may bear in mind here that such nationalist opposition to 'social legislations' was rather intense in the Tamil-speaking areas. For instance, the Congress leader S Sathyamurthy threatened "to perform his little daughter's marriage in defiance of the Sarada Act"; condemned the Hindu Religious Endowment Act as British interference in religious affairs; portrayed devadasis as retainers of national art and culture and said that each of them should dedicate at least one girl to be a future devadasi; and opposed temple entry by the Dalits [Parthasarathy 1979: 116; Sundararajan 1983: 54-55 and 136; and Anandhi 1991: 37-38]. E V Ramasamy reminded the nationalists that it was due to the efforts of "'sarkar dasas' and 'traitors of the nation' and the [British] government" that these acts were passed.[11] The other event which he used as an illustration of native elite opposition to the efforts of the raj to establish a rule of equality was that of 1857. He argued that "...there [was] no scope to treat the events of 1857 as the first event of national freedom struggle. [It was] an attempt to protect Vedic ideas, obscurantism and religion",[12] and congratulated the British for suppressing it.[13] He viewed the sepoys who participated in the events of 1857 as being used by the conservative Indian elites to regain power.

While the first set of reasons offered by E V Ramasamy for the British reluctance to establish Manitha Dharma in India placed the blame squarely on the indigenous elite, his other set of reasons implicated both the British and the local elite. Here, he claimed, the British reluctance was a result of their need to have local collaborators so as "to carry on their rule in this country [India] for ever and to generously loot and transfer the wealth of this country to their own."[14] In identifying such collaborators as the indigenous elite, he implicated both colonialism and the indigenous elite as upholders of Manu Dharma instead of full-fledged Manitha Dharma.

For E V Ramasamy, both these sets of reasons were interlocked. Discussing the opposition to the Devadasi Abolition Act, he characterised the symbiotic relationship between the indigenous elite and the British thus: "...it became necessary for the British to be helpful to the brahmins as the selfish brahmins were helpful and acted as spies [in facilitating] the British rule to arrive and establish itself in our India" and in turn "it became necessary for the British to follow whatever the brahmin said so as to get their [own] things done."[15]

II

'Denationalising' the Past

Such foregrounding of substantive citizenship of the subordinate social groups as the principle constitutive element of the nation placed E V Ramasamy outside the mainstream Indian nationalism as well as the incomplete modernity of the British in the colonial context. In other words, he was free from the need to set the nation in opposition to the coloniser. From this relatively 'unencumbered' political location, he could view the national past as an unmitigated narrative of victimhood which prefigured and resulted in current hierarchies of power and powerlessness within the indigenous society. Through such a narrative of

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victimhood, at one level, he marked out his discourse on the nation as distinct from the discourse of the elite mainstream nationalism which searched for the authentic national self in a classical Indian past. At another level, his narrative refused to be a mere appropriation of the colonialist construction of the Indian past as uncivilised since he, in his search for citizenship, implicated the British as unwilling modernists. In this context, his engagement with the past may be characterised as a project of 'denationalising' the past in the name of the nation.

In analysing how E V Ramasamy 'denationalised' the past, we shall first take a look at his construction of the pan-Indian past and then move on to his engagement with the Tamil past. The need to analyse his engagement with the Tamil past acquires certain urgency given the widespread academic and popular belief that he uncritically privileged a Tamil past and placed it in opposition to the Indian past [Visswanathan 1983: 75; and Lakshmi 1990].[16]

Past in the Present

E V Ramasamy was fully aware of the mainstream nationalists' use of the so-called classical Indian past in their public discourse.[17] For him, this classical Indian past, which was privileged by the mainstream nationalists, was a continuous and uninterrupted story of the hegemony exercised by the iniquitous brahminical Hinduism and Varnashrama Dharma. As a recent study sums up, though reductively:

> According to [Ramasamy] Naicker the brahmans were the descendants of the Aryans who were the first to introduce the status-based caste system. This gave them high ritual status and the power to monopolise all secular and religious knowledge, thereby degrading the native Dravidians to an inferior position. The study of the Vedas, the observance of Vedic rites and the practice of Vedic rituals were the prerogatives of brahmans. Naicker pointed out to the non-brahmans that Manu, the chief brahman law-giver, degraded the bulk of the population to a position of sudras, prevented them from accumulating wealth and advocated that their vocation should be to serve the brahmans. In addition to such prejudicial codes, new rules and regulations were incorporated as and when brahmans found it necessary to prevent other caste groups from challenging their status and privileges. As a result of such sectarian laws, a large segment of non-brahman society was degraded to an inferior position... [Visswanathan 1984].[18]

Given this reading of the Indian past as a narrative of victimhood, he treated religious texts such as *Manusmriti*, *Puranas*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* as fantastic and crafty instruments invented by the upper castes to perpetuate their hegemony.

If such a history of oppression and inequity could have an uninterrupted career for over thousands of years, it was because the superordinate social groups violently put down any challenge to their hegemony, and when violence failed, they co-opted their opponents. He illustrated his claim with the example of Buddhism and argued that the Buddhists, because of their opposition to the hierarchies legitimised by Hinduism, were "beaten up, kicked and tortured on stakes" by upper caste Hindu zealots; and when such violence failed to erase the influence and fame of Buddha, they incorporated Buddha within Hinduism as the "tenth incarnation of Maha Vishnu" and Buddhism as a sect, similar to Saivism and Vaishnavism.[19] Likewise, he pointed out, the brahminical Hinduism co-opted those lower caste opponents who used violence by conferring kshatriya status on them.[20]

This diachronic narrative of the past continuously established its links with the present and argued that the continuation of the past into the present was the source of the continuing subjugation of the subordinate social groups. Tracing the link between his version of the past and the current devaluation of physical labour, for instance, he argued: "...you should realise that if all of you are workers, it is because you were all made into sudras according to Varnashrama Dharma of Hindu religion. Let that pass. If workers are thought of as lowly people, it is because they [sudras] were thought of as lowly people in Hindu religious dharma."[21] Similarly, referring to the current status of women, he noted:

> What Hindu religion tells about women is that god created women at birth itself as prostitutes; so they should not be allowed to be free at any time; they should be controlled by the father at childhood [and] by their sons during old age...
> There is more such evidence in religious shastras. Their intention is nothing other than making women slaves of men [Periyar 1984: 84-85]

Thus the past was not at a remove: it was here and now, feeding into the present, legitimising hierarchies and denying free and equal status to all. It had to be combated if substantive citizenship was to constitute the nation.

Qualified Approval

Let us now turn to E V Ramasamy's engagement with the Tamil past. During the course of the anti-Hindi agitation which contested the compulsory introduction of Hindi in schools by the Congress government in 1937, E V Ramasamy began airing his demand for a separate Tamil Nadu, which evolved over time into a demand for a separate Dravida Nadu. Till the end of his life, he, more or less steadfastly, denied legitimacy to India as one nation and kept his demand alive.

In this context, he did differentiate the Tamil past as more equitous compared to the pan-Indian past. Basing his arguments on ancient Tamil literary texts, he claimed that both the caste system which degraded the non-brahmins and the current marriage customs which emphasised women's subordination were alien to the Tamil past. What is important here is that he used this difference primarily as a heuristic device to deny legitimacy to the Hindu north India to exercise hegemony over other regions and people who had a better record on matters relating to equality. Beyond that, his position on the Tamil past was not different from that on the Indian past, i e, he 'denationalised' the Tamil past too. Interestingly, even in contexts where he favourably referred to the equitous Tamil past, he simultaneously discounted it and claimed that one would not benefit by harping back to the past.[22]

In 1943, when separate Dravida Nadu was very much on the agenda of E V Ramasamy, he wrote: "The unnecessary ancient principles of the Tamils... have become useful [only] for deceiving outsiders and plunging [oneself] into foolishness. It has become a duty of the rationalist that such talk [about ancient Tamil ideas] should not be evoked for any reform from now on."[23] He proceeded further: "If several of our 'Pandits' do not have rational thinking, it is because of the obscurantism of the ancient Tamil principles. *There is nothing at present to be achieved by the talk of ancient Tamils*. Therefore it is an important duty of the people not to give any place for [such] fraudulent speech..." (emphasis mine). A striking illustration of E V Ramasamy's contempt for the Tamil past could be his reaction to the glorification of ancient Tamil women by the women leaders of the anti-Hindi agitation. He intervened to tell them: "It will be worthwhile if you discuss the present status of women and what can be done about achieving women's liberation, instead of glorifying our grandmothers like Allirani, Kannagi and Madhavi."[24]

His overarching denouncement of the Tamil past spared neither the classical Tamil literature nor the ancient Tamil rulers: the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas. *Thirukural* and *Silapathikaram*, which along with *Purananuru* constitute the three so-called glorious texts of the Tamils, came in for barbed criticism in the hands of E V Ramasamy—for they, in his opinion, degraded women and denied them equality with men. He characterised *Silapathikaram* as a text "which began in prostitution, grew in 'chastity' and ended up in foolishness and

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superstition'' [Periyar 1983: 28]. We may note here that chastity, for him, signified women's unfreedom. He wrote:

> The manner in which women are oppressed in Kovalan Kathai [*Silapathikaram*] is extremely bad...
> On the marriage dais itself Kovalan desired a *dasi* and goes with her. Till Kovalan returns, Kannagi didn't decorate herself... didn't eat any good food, ate only food without salt and remained worried. Why should one do all these? Imagine a man in that place [of Kannagi]. What would happen? If the wife had left with another man, would the husband eat food without salt? Would he remain worried without why physical comfort till god brought the wife back? In it [*Silapathikaram*], a separate moral is given for woman and [a separate one] for men... [it was] written so badly as to degrade women [Periyar 1986: 13-14].

Similarly, despite his qualified approval of *Thirukural,* he subjected it to severe criticism for emphasising the subordination of women by glorifying chastity. Referring to the couplet, which claims that a woman who does not worship god but her husband can make rain to shower at her instant command, he wrote: "Would Thiruvalluvar have written these... if he were a woman instead of a man?" [Periyar 1984: 15; see also, Aanaimuthu 1974:II, 1039, 1229, 1257, 1259-66]. He viewed *Kamba Ramayanam* as a text which degraded the Dravidians, and posed to those who defended it on its literary merits: ''They say [*Kamba*] *Ramayanam* is a rare literature. What is the use? However starved one is, would one pick up food from shit... How can anyone who desires self-respect read *Ramayanam*?...''[25]

As much as the Tamil literature of the past, Tamil historical personages such as the Chera, the Chola and the Pandya kings too were scrutinised from the point of whether they upheld or denied equality to their subjects. According to him, the Tamil kings lacked intelligence and self-respect, and, but for them, the Tamils would not have remained the lowest of the castes and as degraded people for the past 2000 to 3000 years. They were unworthy of emulation as they impaled the Buddhists and the Jains, who tried to inculcate better sense among the people, on stakes; patronised and promoted temple culture which helped the idle and foolish to cheat the people; and kept the common people illiterate. He referred to their rules as ''malevolent and barbaric''.[26]

E V Ramasamy reserved the most scathing of his criticisms for the Tamil pundits who constructed and propagated a glorious version of the Tamil past through their readings of classical Tamil literature. He derisively characterised their skills as the mere ability to ''memorise 'literature', give several meanings to one word, confuse the people and collect money...'' The Tamil pundits, for him, were liars, propagandists of obscurantism, and laacking in reasoning powers.[27]

The past, thus, was bereft of anything worth appropriating for the national agenda. The nation could arrive only as a break from it. In short, the past stood 'denationalised' in E V Ramasamy's discourse on the nation.

III

Meta-Narratives of the 'Modern'

A politically unusable and 'denationalised' past and an iniquitous present did not lead E V Ramasamy into a politics of despair. Instead, he located the notion of equal and free citizenship in the anticipatory. What needs to be underscored here is that this future was denied, as we have just seen, the facility of being a recovered past. He framed the journey to this future in what may broadly be termed as the meta-narratives of the 'modern'[28]: rationality and science, faith in human emancipation and progress through struggle, and history.

Though he thought of the past as a continuous story of inequality and unfreedom, he insisted that ''change is inevitable: nobody can stop it'' [Aanaimuthu 1974: II, 1120]:

> Aryan-Dravidian conflict is a conflict which had been going on since the Puranic age. Though we do not know enough about the Puranic age, [we know that] the Buddhists had struggled to destroy the Aryan culture. Mughals, who had the Islamic culture which was opposed to the Hindu, i e, Aryan, culture, also tried to destroy Aryanism. But they didn't succeed.
>
> That is why the brahmins ridicule us, 'When they [the Buddhists and the Mughals] could not succeed, how can the Dravidar Kazhagam succeed!' Let them ridicule [us]! We are not bothered!
>
> I strongly believe that our efforts will succeed... Two hundred years of British rule and 25 years of our rationalist propaganda have reduced the hegemony of Aryan culture.[29]

Similarly, he, in one of his innumerable public speeches, illustrated his faith in history through the changes witnessed by the institution of kingship in India: ''Our kings were venerated as gods; [they were] thought of as the incarnation of gods; [people] did to the king whatever they did to god. But what has happened to all those kings? They were turned into kings who [now] receive their salary from the government.''[30]

Recovery of Self-Worth

But such change through history would not take place on its own; it needed concerted human intervention, and therefore the victims of the past should become active subjects. Here, E V Ramasamy elaborated and energetically propagated the concept of 'Suyamariathai' or self-respect—the foremost thing an active political subject required was the realisation of his/her self-worth. He privileged the concept of Suyamariathai over everything else. He claimed: ''If we attain self-respect, swaraj will arrive within a bat of the eyelid...'' He similarly asserted: ''Self-respect is the only means to attain true swaraj [and] that is man's birth right...'' [Periyar 1978: 13].

Extending this concept of self-worth to the sphere of political intervention, he argued that it was the victims of inequity and unfreedom alone, who, through their active intervention in history, could ensure self-emancipation. In contrast to the mainstream nationalist thought, he believed that no one could speak for and represent the victims of the past, but themselves. For instance, he discounted men's participation in the movement for women's freedom and argued that only women, by appropriating political agency to themselves, could attain independence and equality: ''Can rats ever get freedom because of cats? [Can] sheep and fowl ever get freedom because of foxes? [Can] Indians' wealth ever increase because of the white men? [Can] non-brahmins ever get equality because of brahmins?...'' [Periyar 1984: 83-84]. He repeated the same line of argument to different subordinate social groups such as the sudras, the dalits, workers, and villagers, whom he continually addressed throughout his life as a political propagandist. Thus, his discourse on the nation proliferated with innumerable oppressors and oppressed, each changing into the other contextually and relationally: a sudra male was the oppressed in relation to the brahmin, but simultaneously he was an oppressor in relation to women. The following quote from Annapurna, one of the women activists of the movement led by him, may capture this well: ''Generally our country is colonised by the British; the north Indians have colonised our economy; the brahmins have hegemonised our society; but the most important of all these, men have colonised and oppressed women.''[31] If Annapurna privileged women's oppression over the rest in her political agenda, it is because of her gender location; and in other relational contexts, other oppressions might have got privileged. In short, the struggle for the nation through history was multiple, with porous boundaries, shifting identities and numerous agents of change. Its resolution lay beyond the simple binary of national vs colonial.

As we have seen above, in E V Ramasamy's discourse on the nation, self-respect or the recovery of self-worth was the only means to arrive at the nation. What was the modality for the subordinate social groups to recover their self-worth? He thought that

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it was reason/rationality/science alone that could restore their self-worth and in turn their political agency: "Man today does not have self-confidence. He doesn't think that [it is] he [who] conducts himself. [He] doesn't believe that he is responsible for what he does. He has made a confusion of god, god's commands, god's philosophy, all of which were invented by man himself." Explicating further, he noted: "God and fate are the direct enemies of reason. Because, the person who is enslaved by god and fate has nothing for himself. He is a [mere] piece of wood, floating on water."[32]

Reason/Rationality/Science

He applied his positivist rationality to religious mythologies, read them literally to show how they were impossible tales of fantasy and craft meant to degrade the sudras, the dalits, women and so on. In 1924 he described the idol at the Vaikkom temple as "a mere stone fit only to wash dirty linen with", and such criticism continued all through his career: "Had it not been for the rationalist urge of the modern days, the milestones on the highways would have been converted into gods. It does not take much time for a Hindu to stand a mortar stone in the house and convert it into a great god by smearing red and yellow powders on it..." [Aanaimuthu 1974: I, xxix] (English translation in the original). For him self-respect and rationality could only go together: "I have... broken the idols of Pillayar or Vinayakar and burnt pictures of Rama. If in spite of these words and acts of mine, thousands of people throng to my meetings, it only indicates that self-respect and wisdom have dawned on the people" [Ibid: xxviii].

E V Ramasamy's rational critique, in the very name of the nation, repeatedly violated the cultural certitudes of the nation. The best example here would be his attitude towards language. In his opinion, for a language to be acceptable to the nation, it should be accessible to rational thought, and should enunciate equality and freedom. His attack on Hindi was premised on the argument that it would help people only to read such irrational texts as Tulsi Ramayana and puranas, and contained nothing rational: "Hindi can help only in reaching the heaven; but heaven itself will disappear soon."[33] On the same count, he thought Tamil was better; yet it was greatly lacking. He criticised it for, among other things, being derogatory to women, not having words for the male counterpart of adultress and widow. And he invented the neologism 'vidavan' for widower and 'vibacharan' for those men who went to prostitutes, and sought their popular use [Anandhi 1991: 26]. He argued: "If Tamil has to progress and join the ranks of the world languages, Tamil and religion should be separated."[34] He often expressed in public that English was better than Tamil. He even needed a different Tamil for his Tamil Nadu!

Equally important is his view that the teleology of rationality was interminable, continuously invalidating the past, and disclosing newer avenues of freedom all through. He told his followers that the march of rationality would invalidate his own legacy:

> What is known as rationality will keep changing. What we think today as fit for reason, may be rejected tomorrow as superstition. We ourselves will reject several things—even the sayings of those who are praised as great men. Similarly, the future generation may at a time say about me, "There was a [man] of irrational thinking called Ramasamy". That is natural; a sign of change; a sign of the times [Aanaimuthu 1974: II, 1120].

Thus the course of rationality, for E V Ramasamy, is such that it does not offer a fixed goal, a fixed utopia—the search for freedom can only be an ever-continuing endless search.

IV

History and Rationality

Let us now turn to the implication of E V Ramasamy's concepts of history and rationality for the career of the nation, for these were the concepts which framed the nation's course. The interminable teleology of rationality which constantly invalidated cultural certitudes and progress through struggle as a process with volatile boundaries, identities and agents, rendered his nation a nation without a 'moment of arrival'. It was ever-fluid, remorselessly struggling for citizenship, informed by ever-changing contours of rationalism, and continuously violating boundaries—both in the sense of territory and otherwise. He could thus, while talking about Dravida Nadu, accommodate the whole of the sudras of the north India in his nation: "... [People] who suffer from this [Aryan] degradation are not only those who speak Tamil... [They are] also there in other states, i e, states like Bengal, Bihar, Bombay, Maharashtra where they speak different languages. The degraded comrades there are calling themselves Dravidians; In fact, they are Dravidians."[35] And, similarly, he could denounce Tamil, while opposing the imposition of Hindi in schools: in 1939, when Hindi was a burning issue in Tamil Nadu, he said in the course of a public address:

> I do not have any attachment to the Tamil language for [the reason] that it is my mother tongue or the tongue of the *nation*. I am not attached to it for [the reason] that it is a separate language, ancient language, language spoken by Shiva [or] language created by Agastiyar. I do not have attachment for anything in itself. That will be foolish attachment, foolish adulation. I may have attachment [for something] for its qualities and the benefits such qualities will result in. I don't praise something because it is my language, my *nation*, my religion...
>
> If I think my *nation* is unhelpful for my ideal and cannot [also] be made helpful, I will abandon [it] immediately. Likewise, if I think my language will not benefit my ideals or [will not help] my people to progress [and] live in honour, I will abandon it... [Chidamparanar 1983:214] (emphasis mine).

In short, E V Ramasamy's nation, freed from the past, located in the anticipatory and framed by notions of 'modernity from below' was a metaphor, a metaphor which stood for ever-fluid, free and equal citizenship. Its success can never be assessed in terms of its arrival, but perhaps only in terms of its continuing ability to inspire diverse subordinate social groups in the present-day Tamil Nadu to question the Indian nation-state for its failings, and to imagine nations of equity and freedom lying in future

Notes

[An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop on 'Nationalising the Past', held in Goa on May 21-23, 1993. The workshop was sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, New York. The paper draws liberally from the ongoing joint work on the history of the Dravidian Movement by A R Venkatachalapathy, Anandhi S and myself. I am grateful to Padmini Swaminathan and J Jeyaranjan for their extremely useful comments on an earlier version.]

1 For details of E V Ramasamy's role in the Indian National Congress, see Irschick (1969:268-74); Arooran (1980:152-59); and Visswanathan (1983: 38-65).

2 *Kudi Arasu*, May 2, 1925; see also *Puratchi*, December 24, 1933.

3 On how Gandhi tried to solve the question of varna on a moral plane—by idealising hierarchies as differences—rather than on a political plane, see Parekh (1989: 207-46).

4 *Viduthalai*, January 19, 1948, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 673).

5 *Kudi Arasu*, June 1, 1930, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 649).

6 An obituary of E V Ramasamy published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (January 12, 1974) summed up his engagement with women's issues thus: "He championed the cause of widow remarriage, of marriage based on consent, and of women's right to divorce and abortion. Pointing out that there was no Tamil word for the coun-

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terpart of an adulteress, he fumed, ...the word adultress implies man's conception of woman as a slave, a commodity to be sold and hired'. Periyar's demand at a conference two years ago that no odium should be attached to a woman who desired a man other than her husband (which the press so avidly vulgarised), as well as Periyar's advocacy of the abolition of marriage as the only way of freeing woman from enslavement, were about as radical as the views of any women liberationist." For a detailed account of E V Ramasamy's position on women's issues, see Anandhi (1991)

7 *Viduthalai*, October 11, 1948.

8 Speech in Kollampalayam on September 19, 1937, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 682).

9 *Kudi Arasu*, November 25, 1944, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 703).

10 *Kudi Arasu*, May 17, 1931, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 777).

11 *Kudi Arasu*, May 17, 1931, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 777).

12 *Viduthalai*, August 15, 1957, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 691).

13 *Viduthalai*, October 16, 1966, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 846).

14 *Kudi Arasu*, May 17, 1931, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 777).

15 *Kudi Arasu*, March 23, 1930, in Aanaimuthu (1974: I, 173).

16 For a critique of Lakshmi (1990), see Pandian et al (1991).

17 For instance, see *Kudi Arasu*, March 19, 1933, in Aanaimuthu (1974: I, 376).

18 Visswanathan (1983:75) characterises E V Ramasamy's reading ot the Indian past as based on 'race theory', But E V Ramasamy used the words 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' as denoting differing cultural complexes, the relationship between them being mediated by power and powerlessness. In the words of Ramasamy himself, "The Dravidians have a distinct origin in society, their languages are independent and belong to separate classes. The terms 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' are not my inventions. They are historical realities. They can be found in any school boy's textbook. That the *Ramayana* is an allegoric representation of the invading Aryans and the domiciled Dravidians has been accepted by all historians including Pandit Nehru and all reformers including Swami Vivekananda. My desire is not to perpetuate this difference, but to unite the two opposing elements in society. I am not a believer in the race theory propounded by the late Nazi leader of Germany. None can divide the south Indian people into two races by means of any blood test. It is not only suicidal but most reactionary. But the fundamental difference between two different cultures, Aryan and Dravidian, cannot be refuted by anyone who has closely studied the daily life, habits and customs and literature of these two distinct elements in south India" *The Hindu*, January 26, 1950).

The tendency to attribute 'race theory' to E V Ramasamy lies at least partly in translating the Tamil word 'inam' into English as race. 'Inam' is a dexterous Tamil word which can signify different forms of community.

19 Speech in 1954, in Aanaimuthu (1974: I, 312).

20 *Kudi Arasu*, August 15, 1926, in Aanaimuthu (1974: I, 11).

21 *Viduthalai*, January 20, 1948, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 786).

22 For instance, see Aanaimuthu (1974: I, 23, 215).

23 *Kudi Arasu*, January 10, 1943, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 1251-52).

24 *Kudi Arasu*, November 27, 1938.

25 *Kudi Arasu*, January 26, 1936, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 977).

26 *Viduthalai*, August 15, 1957, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 692).

27 *Viduthalai*, March 16, 1967, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 984).

28 As the paper proceeds, we shall see that E V Ramasamy's engagement with modernity was rather opposed to the mainstream nationalists' engagement with the same. While the mainstream nationalists, through a discourse of modernity, turned the state into the sole spokesperson for the nation [Chatterjee 1986: Chapter 5], Ramasamy's modernity perennially remained contestatory. One may differentiate his version of modernity as 'modernity from below' as opposed to 'modernity from above'. Such distinction seems important as scholars ranging from Ashis Nandy to Dipesh Chakrabarty to Ramachandra Guha, in the Indian context, represent modernity only as an elite agenda, and arrive at conclusions like 'caste is eco-friendly' [Gadgil and Guha 1992]. In fact, the need for such distinctions about modernity is repeatedly emphasised in the feminist criticism of the current wave of post-modernism [for instance, see Lovibond 1989; and Jaggar 1990].

29 *Viduthalai*, January 27, 1950, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 683). See also, Periyar (1984: 73).

30 *Viduthalai*, December 23, 1954, in Aanaimuthu (1974: I, 337).

31 *Kudi Arasu*, November 29, 1947.

32 *Kudi Arasu*, May 25, 1935, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 1117).

33 Speech on September 19, 1937, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 655).

34 *Kudi Arasu*, January 26, 1936, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 976).

35 *Viduthalai*, January 27, 1950, in Aanaimuthu (1974: II, 683).

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